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WILLINGHAM
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May 06
SUGGESTED FOR
MATURE READERS
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My narration begins in a small military outpost called Fort Walder, deep inside the barbarian Arabian Fable lands.



I'M SORRY, JUNE, BUT RODNEY IS CONFINED TO HIS QUARTERS UNTIL I DECIDE WHAT TO DO ABOUT HIM.

That's where I first met and fell in love with Rodney, a prince of the sacred wood and a decorated lieutenant of the Seventh Horde.



WERE YOU A PARTY TO HIS LETTER?

I WAS AWARE HE WANTED TO WRITE IT, CAPTAIN ARTURO. I DIDN'T REALIZE HE ACTUALLY HAD.

HOWEVER, ANY DOOM THAT ACCRUES TO HIM FOR AUTHORIZING IT SHOULD ALSO FALL EQUALLY ON ME.

And where, for love of me, he found himself in dire peril.



PLEASE DON'T BE NOBLE, JUNE.

NOBILITY ONLY FURTHER COMPLICATES AN ALREADY THOROUGHLY MUDDLED SITUATION.

The Ballad of Rodney and June

—PART 2 OF 2—

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I'LL LET YOU KNOW **WHEN** AND **IF** YOU CAN SEE LIEUTENANT RODNEY.

THANK YOU, SIR.



OUTSIDE OF RODNEY'S QUARTERS...

EXCUSE ME, LIEUTENANT. MAY I SPEAK WITH YOU?

I'M NOT SURE YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO, CHESTER.



WELL, ORDERS ARE YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO SPEAK TO **ANYONE** BUT THE GUARD AT YOUR DOOR, AND THAT'S ME FOR THIS WATCH.

VERY WELL, BUT MAKE IT **BRIEF**. AND LEAVE THE DOOR OPEN, SO YOU HAVEN'T QUITE ABANDONED YOUR POST.

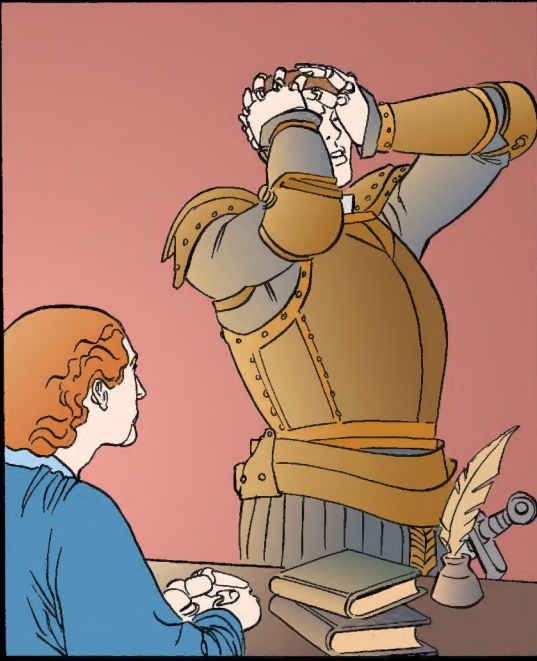


CAN WE SET RANK ASIDE FOR A MOMENT, SIR, AND TALK AS TWO **BROTHERS** OF THE WOOD?

SURE. WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND?



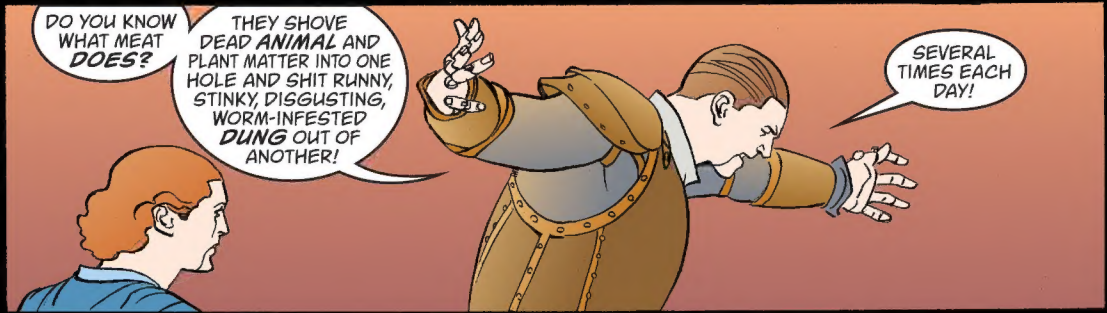
I-- UHM-- UH... HOW DO I PUT THIS?



GODS DAMN IT, RODNEY, HOW CAN YOU POSSIBLY WANT TO BE TRANSFORMED INTO MEAT?

EVERY-ONE'S HEARD ABOUT IT! EVERYONE OF THE WOOD, THAT IS!

I TAKE IT YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT THE LETTER.



DO YOU KNOW WHAT MEAT DOES?

THEY SHOVE DEAD ANIMAL AND PLANT MATTER INTO ONE HOLE AND SHIT RUNNY, STINKY, DISGUSTING, WORM-INFESTED DUNG OUT OF ANOTHER!

SEVERAL TIMES EACH DAY!



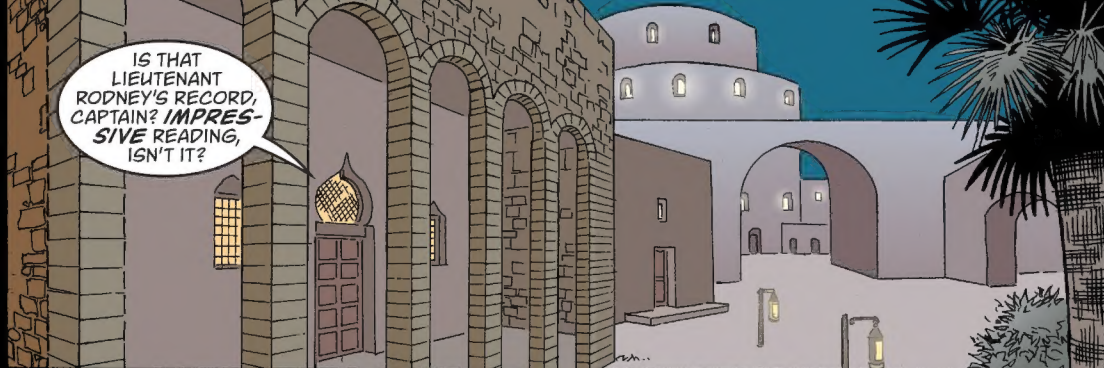
THEY DIE FROM INFECTION AND STARVATION AND SICKNESS AND THE SLIGHTEST WOUNDS!

A SIMPLE SWORD CUT WE WOULD SHRUG OFF IS ENOUGH TO DIS-MEMBER A MEAT SOLDIER!



I'VE HEARD THIS LITANY BEFORE, CHESTER. HELL, I'VE RECITED IT BEFORE.

SINCE YOU'VE GOT NOTHING NEW TO SAY TO ME, GET OUT. GO BACK OUTSIDE AND STAND YOUR WATCH, BEFORE SOMEONE REPORTS YOU.



IS THAT LIEUTENANT RODNEY'S RECORD, CAPTAIN? **IMPRESSIVE** READING, ISN'T IT?



YES, COLOR SERGEANT. IT'S A FAT **CHRONICLE** OF GLORY AND ACHIEVEMENT, WITHOUT BLEMISH.

UNTIL TODAY.



HE'S A **GOOD** SOLDIER AND MY **CLOSEST** FRIEND. WE CAME UP THROUGH THE RANKS TOGETHER.

IF HE HADN'T WRITTEN THAT DAMNED LETTER, I'D BE RECOMMENDING HIM FOR HIS NEXT **PROMOTION** AND THE BLOODY IMPERIAL SHIELD OF HONOR.

IF YOU'LL PARDON MY IMPERTINENCE, SIR, WHAT LETTER WOULD **THAT** BE?



THERE'S NO **LETTER** FROM LIEUTENANT RODNEY IN THE OUTGOING MAIL PACKET.

TRUE. THERE **IS** NO LETTER.



EXCUSE ME, COLOR SERGEANT. IF YOU'LL FINISH THE NIGHTLY REPORT, I HAVE AN **ERRAND** TO RUN.



I KNOW IT'S AN IMPOSITION, AND AN ARDUOUS JOURNEY, BUT I'M ASKING YOU TO **TAKE** IT, RODNEY--FOR THE GOOD OF THE ARMY'S ESPRIT DE CORPS.

TAKE MISS JUNE WITH YOU. SHE CAN ADD HER OUTSIDER'S WITNESS TO THE **HIGH** LEVEL OF LOYALTY AND PROFESSIONALISM OF THIS DETACHMENT.

FUNNY THING, THOUGH. ANYONE WHO **REALLY** WANTED TO ASK OUR FATHER WHAT WAS RUMORED TO BE IN THAT NON-EXISTENT LETTER MIGHT JUST ASK HIM IN PERSON.

THAT WAY, WITH NOTHING WRITTEN DOWN WHERE ALIEN EYES MIGHT ONE DAY **SPY** IT, NO TREASON'S BEEN COMMITTED.

A **WISE** OBSERVATION, SIR.

HERE'S MY MILITARY PASS FOR ALL GATES AND CHECKPOINTS. **DON'T** LOSE IT AND MAKE SURE IT FINDS ITS WAY BACK TO ME.

PACK YOUR THINGS. **BOTH** OF YOU.

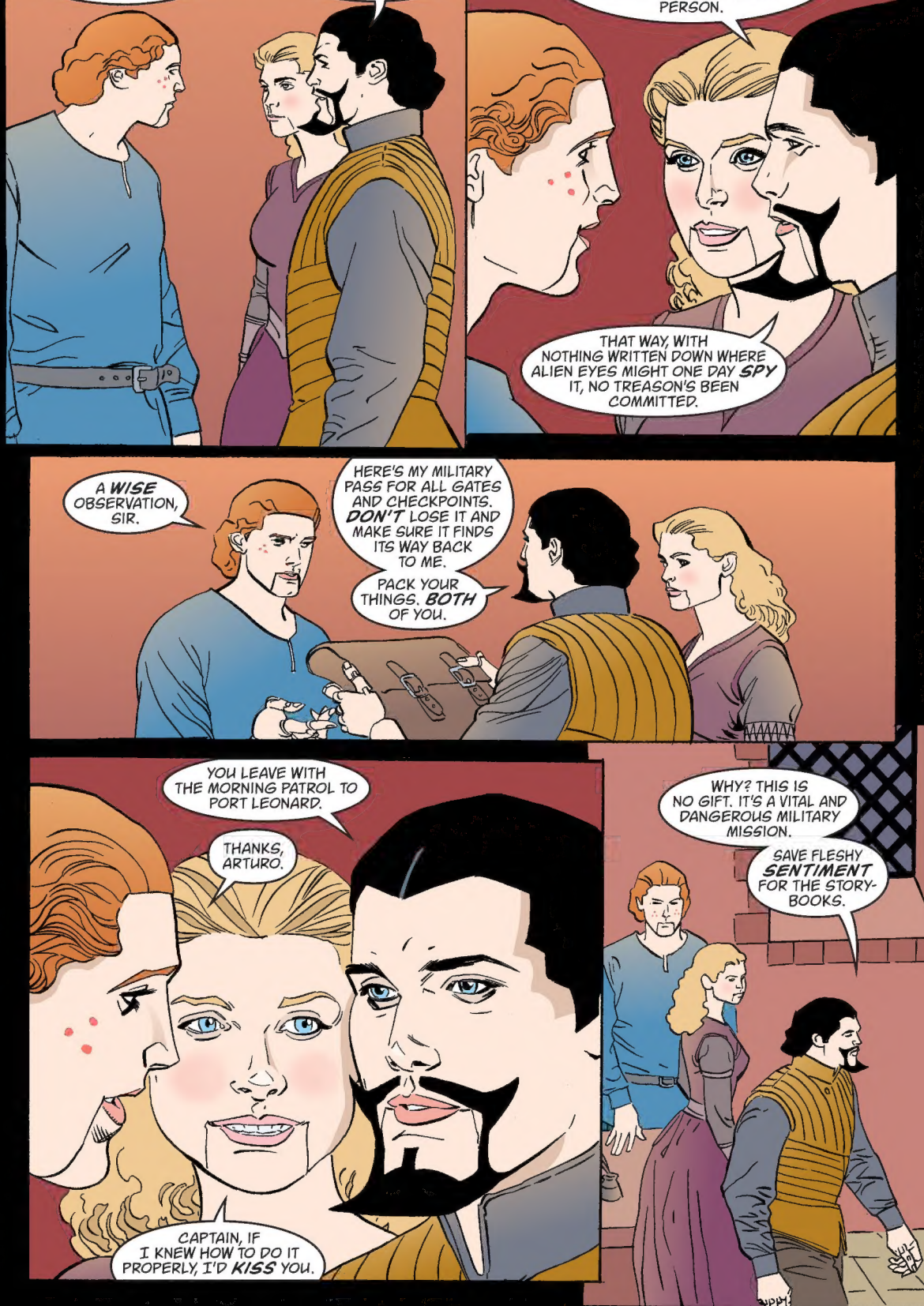
YOU LEAVE WITH THE MORNING PATROL TO PORT LEONARD.

THANKS, ARTURO.

WHY? THIS IS NO GIFT. IT'S A VITAL AND DANGEROUS MILITARY MISSION.

SAVE FLESHY **SENTIMENT** FOR THE STORY-BOOKS.

CAPTAIN, IF I KNEW HOW TO DO IT PROPERLY, I'D **KISS** YOU.



And just like that, we were saved. We left wonderful, glorious Fort Walder the next day.

We traversed fierce deserts.

EYES SHARP FOR ARABIAN RAIDERS, MEN.

And crossed wide, wild oceans in tall ships of the line.

And passed as honored dignitaries through the gates linking one World of Empire to another.

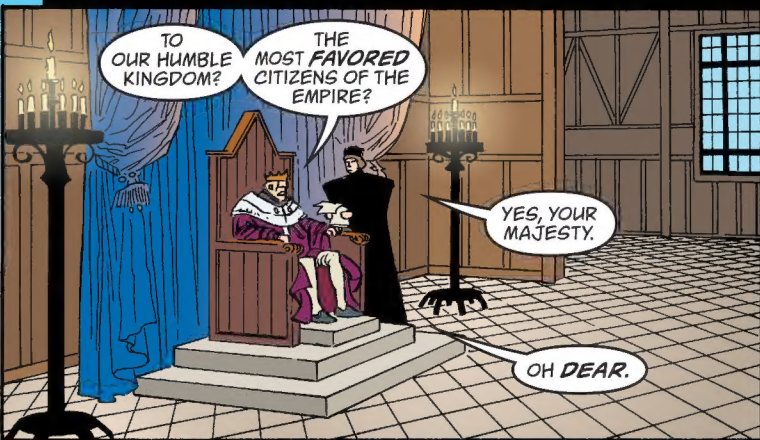
ONCE YOU ENTER THE PORTAL, KEEP WALKING. DON'T STOP UNTIL YOU EXIT ON THE OTHER SIDE.

THERE MAY BE SOME DISCOMFORT AND NAUSEA DURING TRANSITION. THIS IS NORMAL.

Each day was a new adventure.

ARE YOU CERTAIN?

TWO PERSONS OF THE SACRED WOOD ARE COMING HERE?



TO OUR HUMBLE KINGDOM?

THE MOST FAVORED CITIZENS OF THE EMPIRE?

YES, YOUR MAJESTY.

OH DEAR.



WE MUST PREPARE A TRIUMPH FOR THEM!

IMMEDIATELY, SIRE.

AND EVERY SORT OF HONOR!



A ROYAL BANQUET!

THEY DON'T EAT, SIRE. AND I HEAR TELL THEY'RE DISDAINFUL OF THOSE WHO DO.

OH YES. OF COURSE.



CANCEL THE BANQUET! TAKE AN EDICT:

WE'LL CELEBRATE THEM WITH DAYS OF FASTING! NO MEALS WILL BE SERVED OR EATEN, THROUGHOUT THE KINGDOM, WHILE OUR GUESTS ABIDE AMONG US!



A MASTERFUL DECISION, SIRE.

HOW ABOUT THE ROYAL PROSTITUTE CORPS? DO THEY COPULATE?

I DON'T BELIEVE SO, SIRE.



THEN HOWSOEVER WILL WE ENTERTAIN THEM?

WHAT DO THEY LIKE TO DO?



THEY LIKE TO SOLDIER MOSTLY-- TRAIN AND MARCH AND PARADE AND CHOP AT THINGS WITH THEIR SWORDS.

OR SO I AM GIVEN TO UNDERSTAND.

GOOD!

NOW WE'RE GETTING SOMEWHERE!



WE'LL PRESENT THEM WITH OUR HIGHEST MILITARY AWARDS!

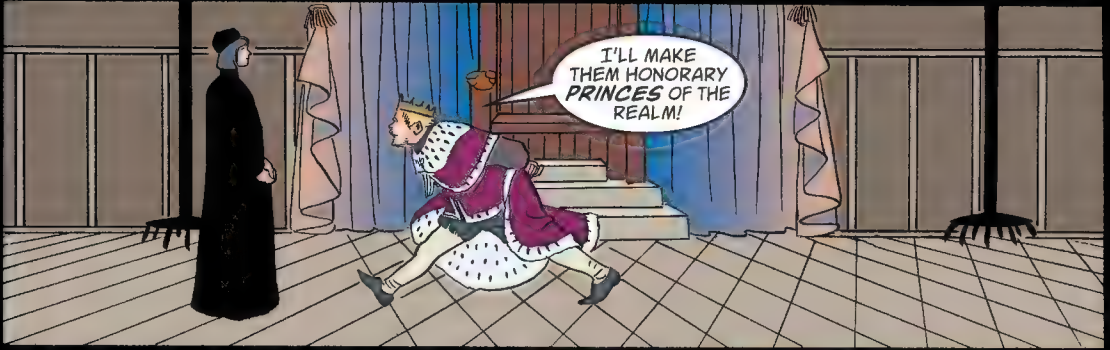
I'LL ORDER THOSE PREPARED IN ALL HASTE.



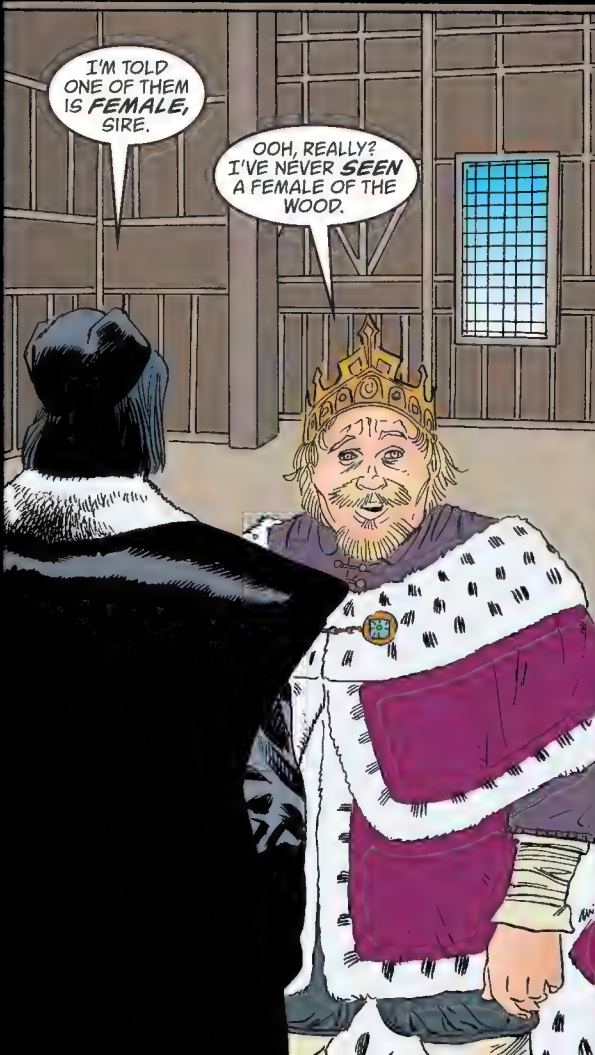
OOH!

OOH!

INSPIRATION!



I'LL MAKE THEM HONORARY PRINCES OF THE REALM!



I'M TOLD ONE OF THEM IS FEMALE, SIRE.

OOH, REALLY? I'VE NEVER SEEN A FEMALE OF THE WOOD.



EVEN BETTER, THOUGH!

ONE PRINCE AND ONE PRINCESS!

In our long journey across the empire...

...we accumulated new awards and noble titles faster than we could count them.

WHAT'S THIS ONE AGAIN?

They were heaped upon us from every kingdom we passed through.

UHM-- THE ORDER OF THE SHINING BASILISK, I THINK.

And such presents!

OH...

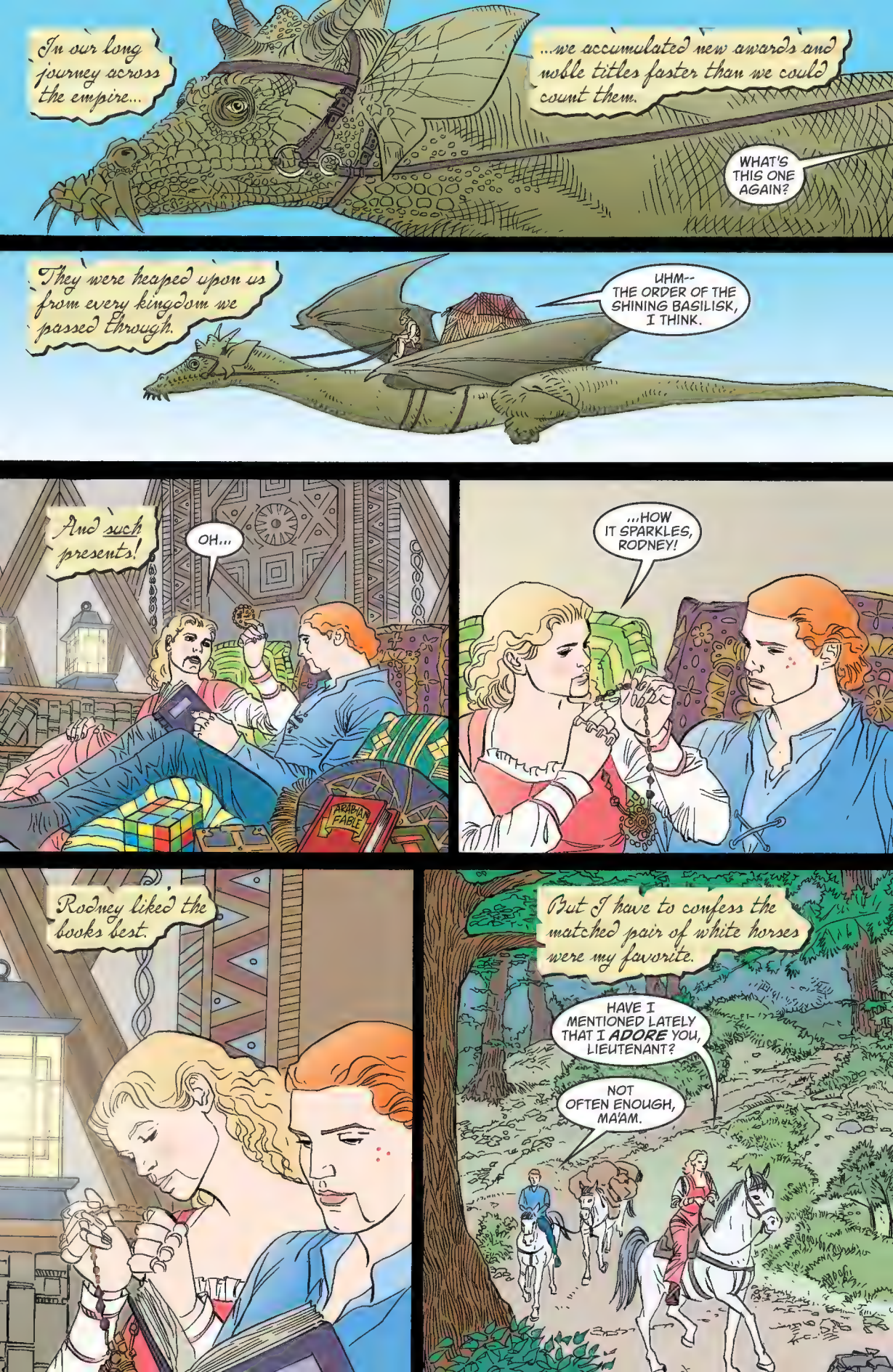
...HOW IT SPARKLES, RODNEY!

Rodney liked the books best.

But I have to confess the matched pair of white horses were my favorite.

HAVE I MENTIONED LATELY THAT I **ADORE** YOU, LIEUTENANT?

NOT OFTEN ENOUGH, MA'AM.



Of course, even deep within the Empire there were dangers.

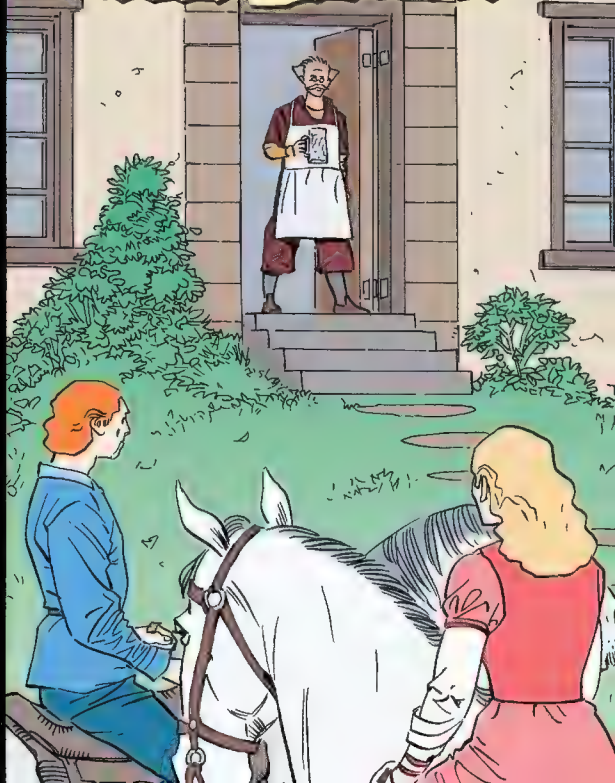
STAND BACK, DARLING.

Each new world we traversed included vast wildernesses, filled with every manner of fell beast.

THIS CRITTER HAS HIS DANDER UP.

Finally, after months of travel, we arrived at the Imperial City.

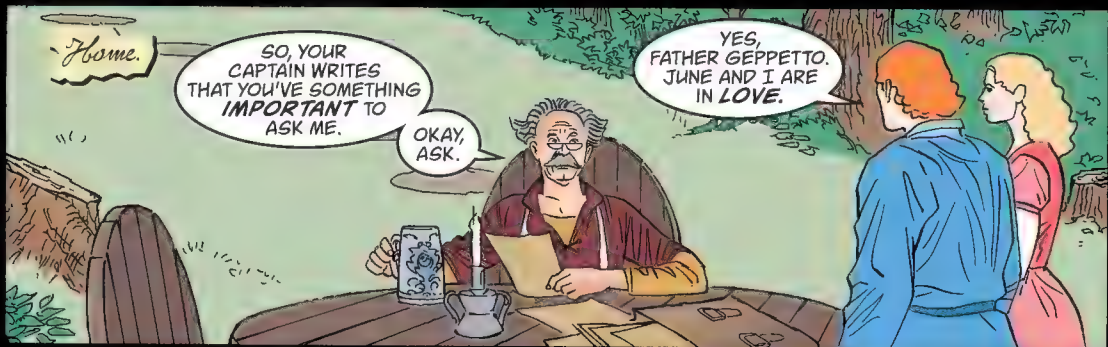
And shortly thereafter to the humble cottage, nestled snugly within the most hallowed spot in the universe.





The sacred grove.

RODNEY AND JUNE, EH? **QUIT** STANDING THERE LIKE STATUES AND COME CLOSE ENOUGH SO THAT I CAN **SEE** YOU.



Home.

SO, YOUR CAPTAIN WRITES THAT YOU'VE SOMETHING **IMPORTANT** TO ASK ME.

OKAY, ASK.

YES, FATHER GEPPETTO, JUNE AND I ARE IN **LOVE**.



WE'D LIKE YOU TO TRANSFORM US INTO **REAL** FLESH.

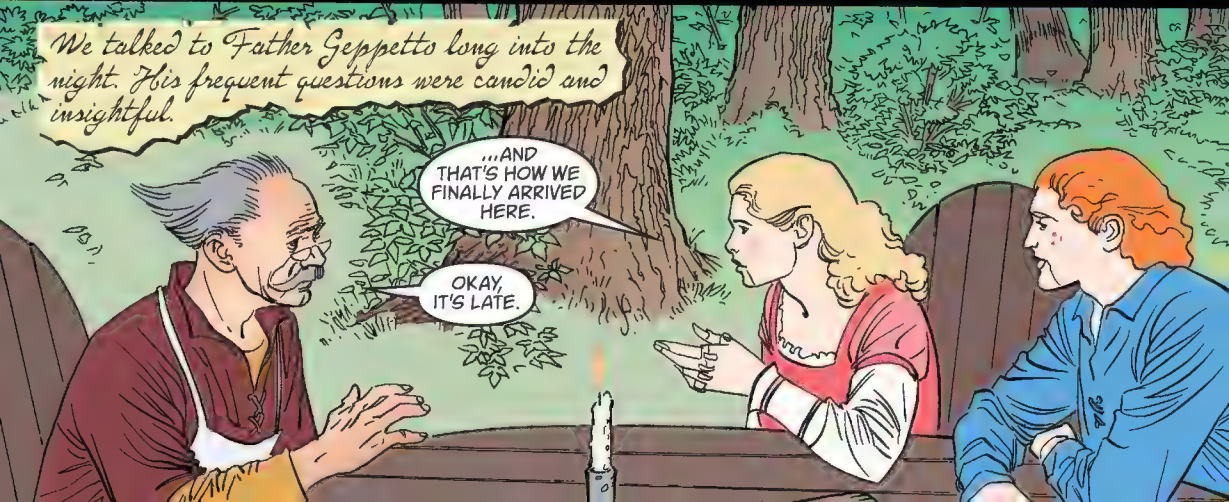
SO THAT WE CAN MARRY...

...AND EXPRESS OUR LOVE IN-- UHM...



IN **CARNAL** WAYS. YES, CHILDREN. I'M NOT SO OLD I'VE FORGOTTEN THAT.

TELL ME HOW YOU ARRIVED AT SUCH A DECISION.



We talked to Father Geppetto long into the night. His frequent questions were candid and insightful.

...AND THAT'S HOW WE FINALLY ARRIVED HERE.

OKAY, IT'S LATE.



AND UNLIKE YOU TWO, THIS **OLD** SOUL NEEDS HIS SLEEP.

ONE LAST QUESTION THOUGH.

NO GIFT OF THIS MAGNITUDE IS BESTOWED WITHOUT A DEAR PRICE.



SOMETIMES A **TERRIBLE** PRICE.



WHILE I REST, PONDER TOGETHER WHETHER YOU'RE DISPOSED TO PAY IT.

The next weeks were a blur. Geppetto made us into glorious flesh.



THAT'S IT, RODNEY. DRINK IT ALL DOWN.

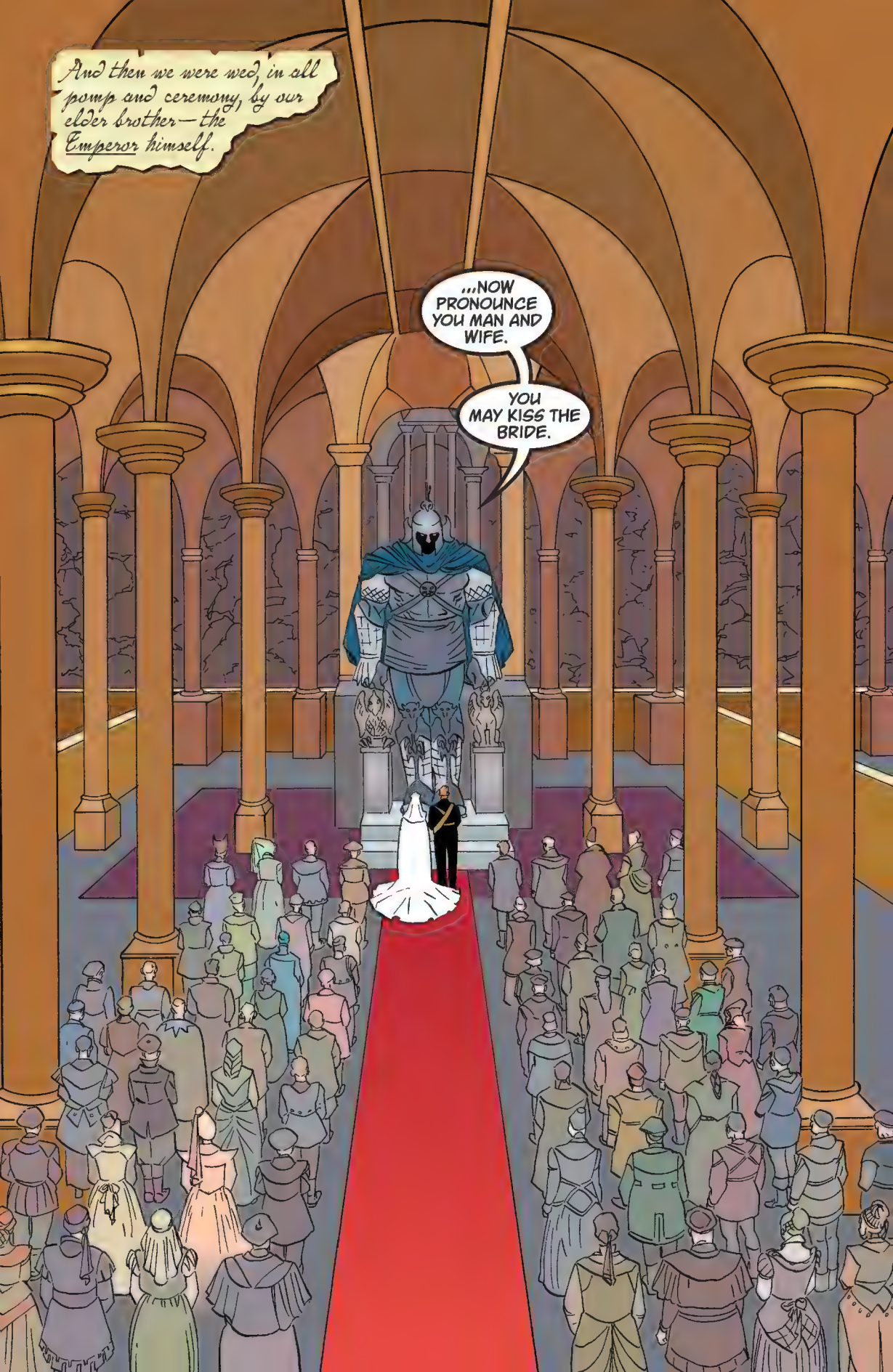
I FEEL-- I FEEL--

--WONDERFUL!

*And then we were wed, in all
pomp and ceremony, by our
elder brother—the
Emperor himself.*

...NOW
PRONOUNCE
YOU MAN AND
WIFE.

YOU
MAY KISS THE
BRIDE.





Somewhere along the way we perfected the art of kissing.



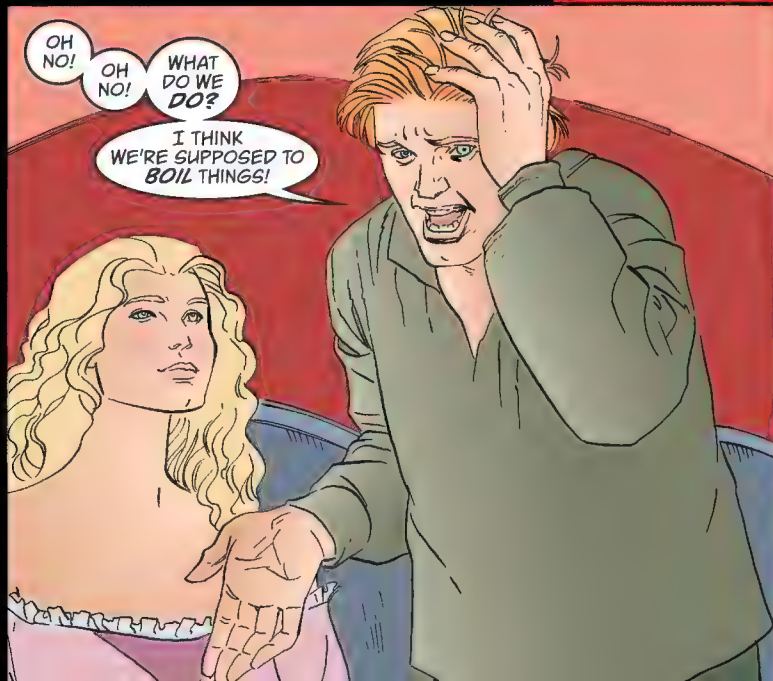
And learned many other pleasures on our wedding night.



Life was perfect.

RODNEY, LIGHT OF MY LIFE, I THINK I MAY BE WITH CHILD.

REALLY?



OH NO!

OH NO!

WHAT DO WE DO?

I THINK WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BOIL THINGS!



I THINK THAT COMES A BIT LATER, DEAR.

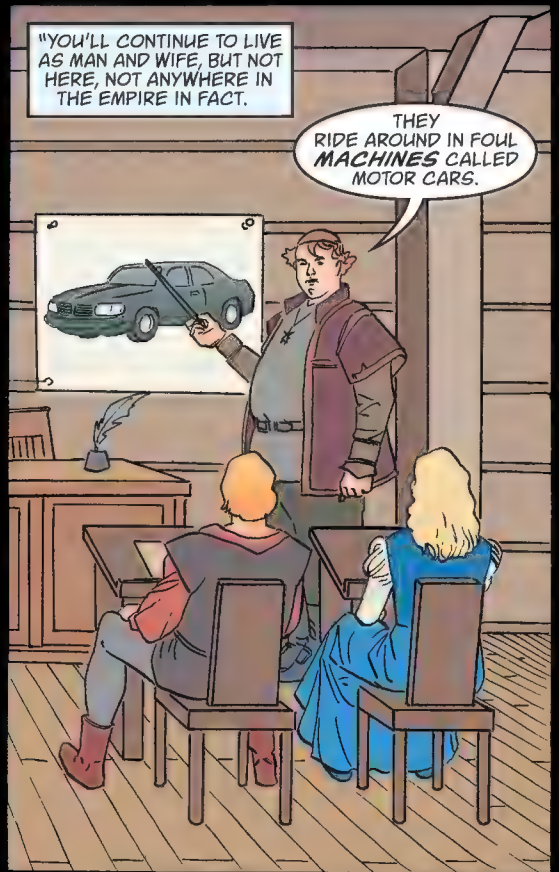
Then all that changed when we met the Snow Queen.

YOU'VE GOTTEN YOUR WISH. NOW IT'S TIME TO PAY THE **DEBT**.

YOU'VE BEEN SELECTED TO PROVIDE A UNIQUE AND VALUABLE **SERVICE** TO THE EMPIRE.

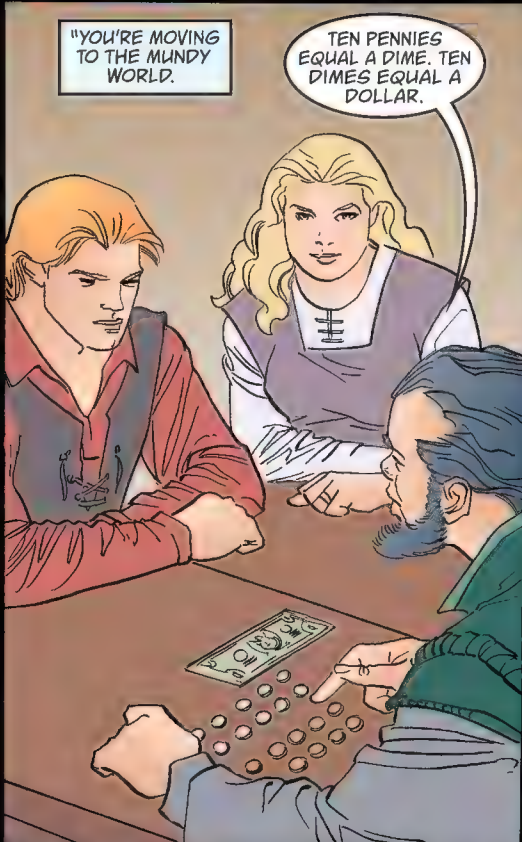
"YOU'LL CONTINUE TO LIVE AS MAN AND WIFE, BUT NOT HERE, NOT ANYWHERE IN THE EMPIRE IN FACT.

THEY RIDE AROUND IN FOUL **MACHINES** CALLED MOTOR CARS.



"YOU'RE MOVING TO THE MUNDY WORLD.

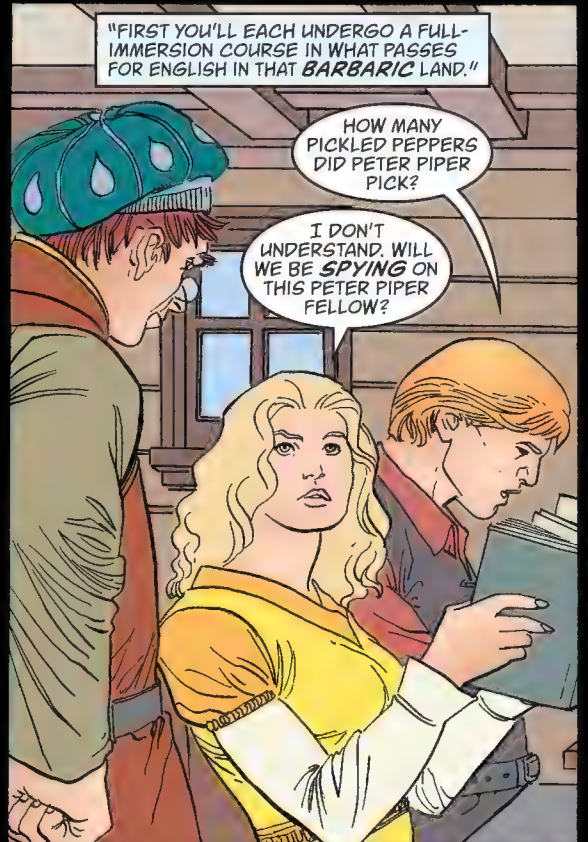
TEN PENNIES EQUAL A DIME. TEN DIMES EQUAL A DOLLAR.



"FIRST YOU'LL EACH UNDERGO A FULL-IMMERSION COURSE IN WHAT PASSES FOR ENGLISH IN THAT **BARBARIC** LAND."

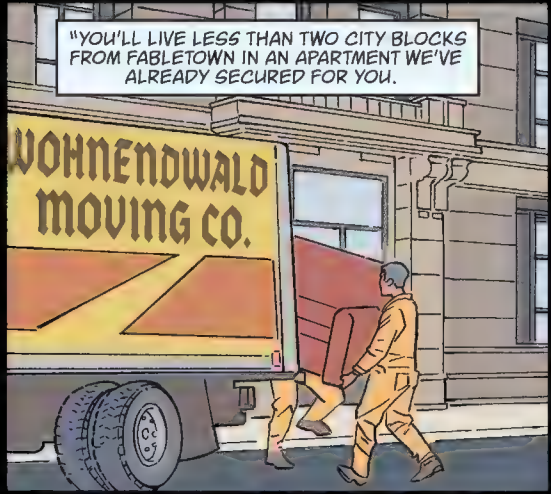
HOW MANY PICKLED PEPPERS DID PETER PIPER PICK?

I DON'T UNDERSTAND. WILL WE BE **SPYING** ON THIS PETER PIPER FELLOW?

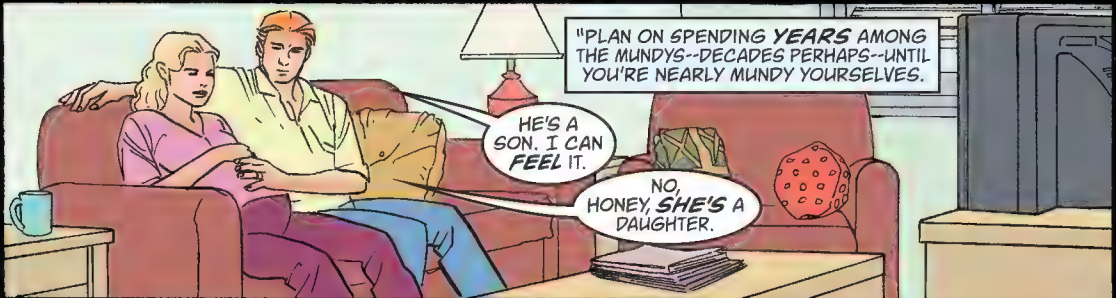




"THEN YOU'LL BE PUT TO SLEEP FOR THE PASSAGE THROUGH THE GATE TO THE MUNDY WORLD, SO THAT YOU CAN **NEVER** REVEAL ITS LOCATION.



"YOU'LL LIVE LESS THAN TWO CITY BLOCKS FROM FABLETOWN IN AN APARTMENT WE'VE ALREADY SECURED FOR YOU.



"PLAN ON SPENDING YEARS AMONG THE MUNDYS--DECADES PERHAPS--UNTIL YOU'RE NEARLY MUNDY YOURSELVES.

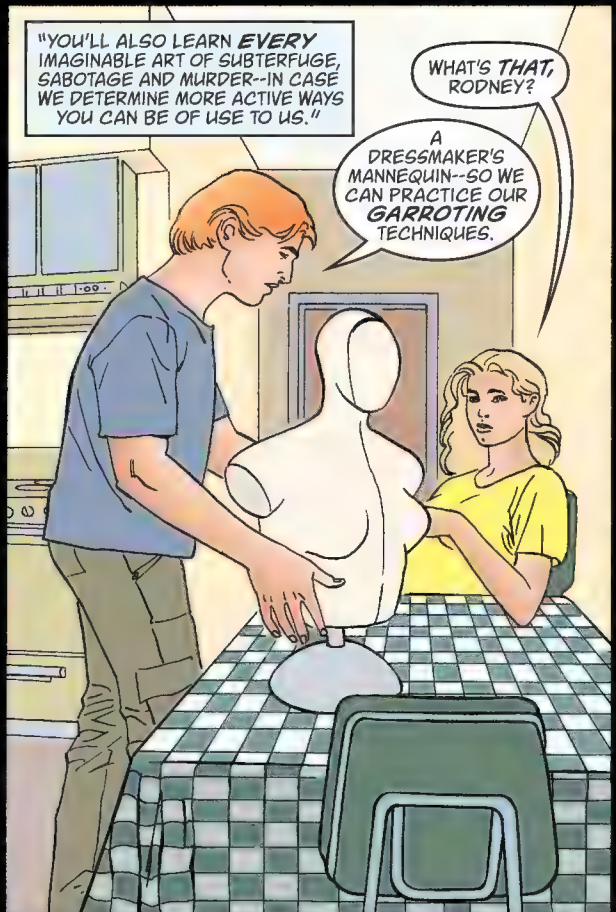
HE'S A SON. I CAN FEEL IT.

NO, HONEY, SHE'S A DAUGHTER.



"YOU'LL GET JOBS, RAISE YOUR FAMILY, **ALWAYS** BLENDING IN, OBSERVING AND REPORTING ON FABLETOWN ALL THE WHILE.

...WALKED OUT ON THE STREETS OF LAREDO...



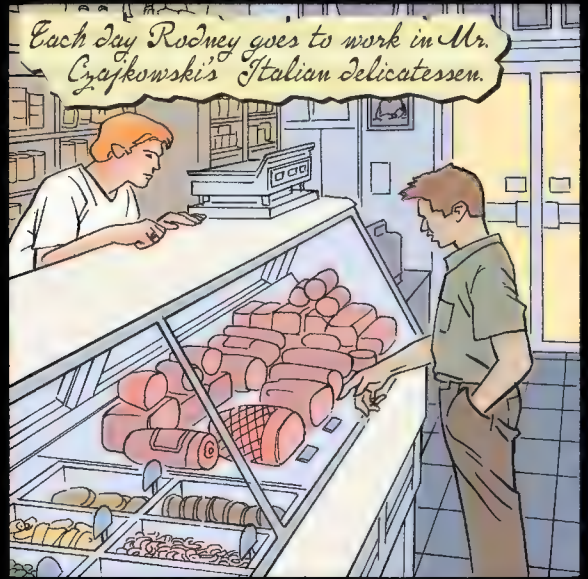
"YOU'LL ALSO LEARN **EVERY** IMAGINABLE ART OF SUBTERFUGE, SABOTAGE AND MURDER--IN CASE WE DETERMINE MORE ACTIVE WAYS YOU CAN BE OF USE TO US."

WHAT'S THAT, RODNEY?

A DRESSMAKER'S MANNEQUIN--SO WE CAN PRACTICE OUR **GARROTING** TECHNIQUES.



*So here we are. Mr. and Mrs. Greenwood.
Normal American
immigrants.*



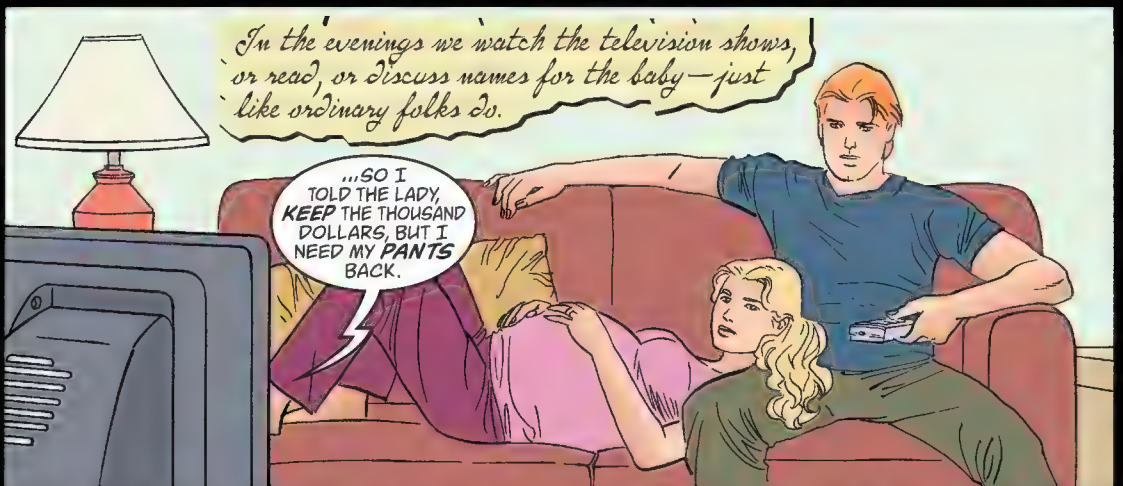
*Each day Rodney goes to work in Mr.
Czajkowski's Italian delicatessen.*



*I keep the home clean, clothes washed,
and cook our meals.*

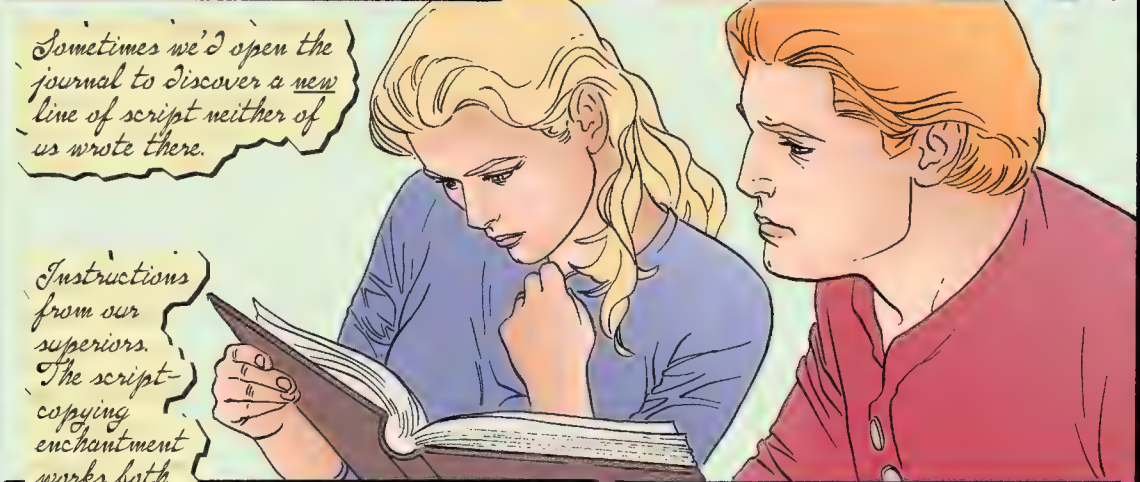
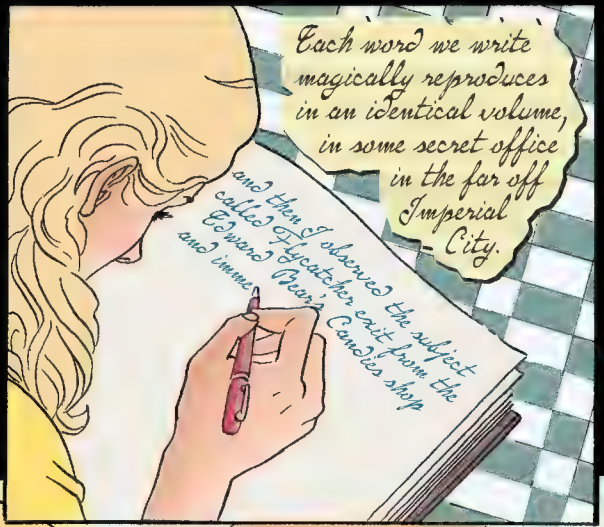
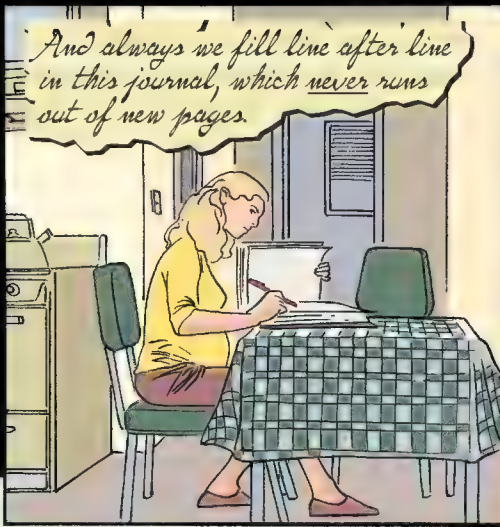


*We work hard
at being ordinary.
Invisible.*



*In the evenings we watch the television shows,
or read, or discuss names for the baby — just
like ordinary folks do.*

*...SO I
TOLD THE LADY,
KEEP THE THOUSAND
DOLLARS, BUT I
NEED MY PANTS
BACK.*

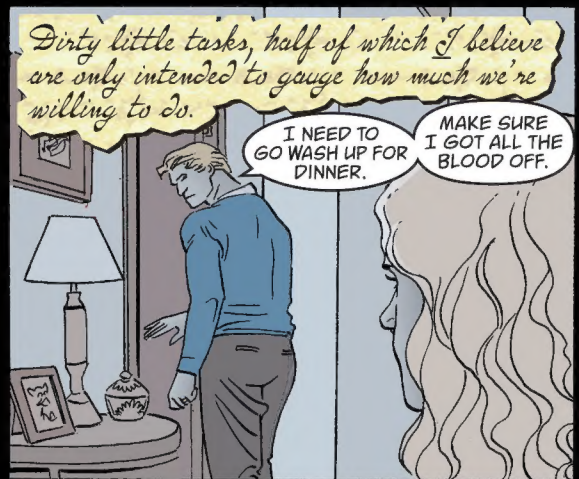




They're the times when Rodney (usually) or I (rarely) have to go out on special errands.

I'M BACK, JUNE.

THANK THE GODS! I WAS SO WORRIED THEY'D CAUGHT YOU.



Dirty little tasks, half of which I believe are only intended to gauge how much we're willing to do.

I NEED TO GO WASH UP FOR DINNER.

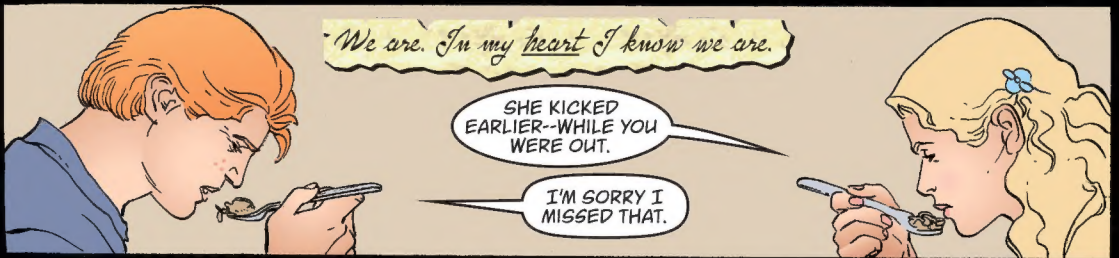
MAKE SURE I GOT ALL THE BLOOD OFF.



So far we've done every terrible deed. Because we're loyal to our Empire.

HOW'S THE BABY TODAY?

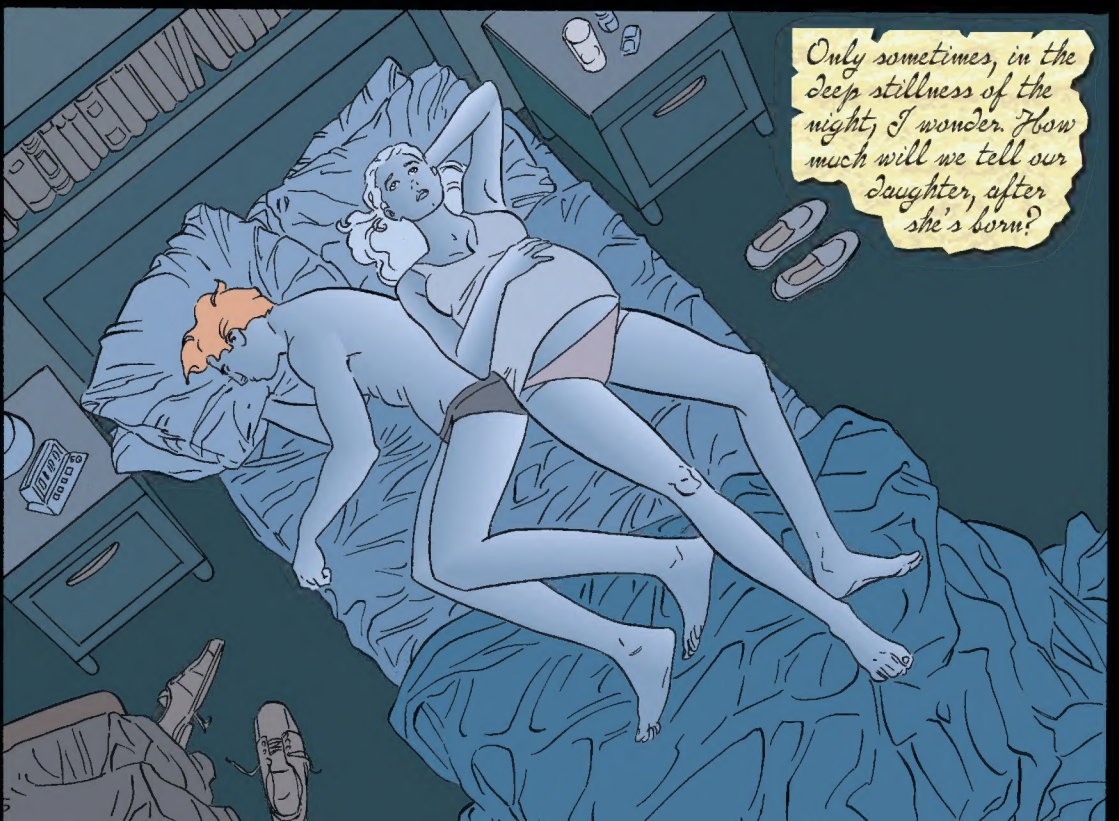
FINE.



We are. In my heart I know we are.

SHE KICKED EARLIER--WHILE YOU WERE OUT.

I'M SORRY I MISSED THAT.



Only sometimes, in the deep stillness of the night, I wonder. How much will we tell our daughter, after she's born?

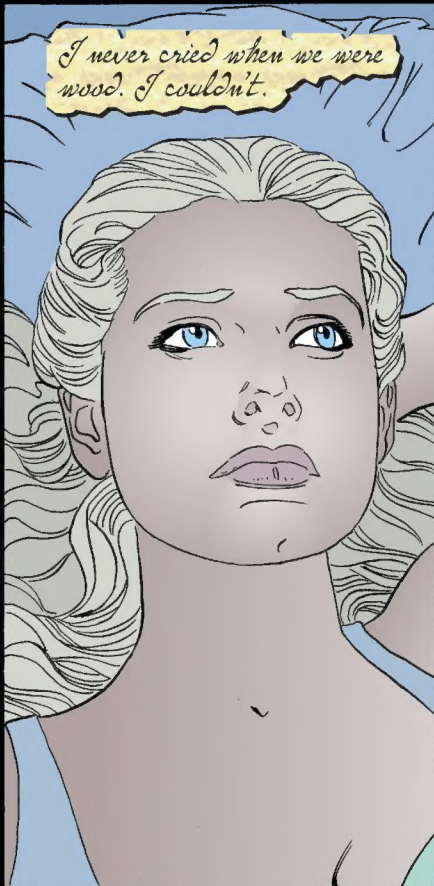


Will we tell her the truth when she's old enough? Or should we raise her as a happy, spoiled American child...

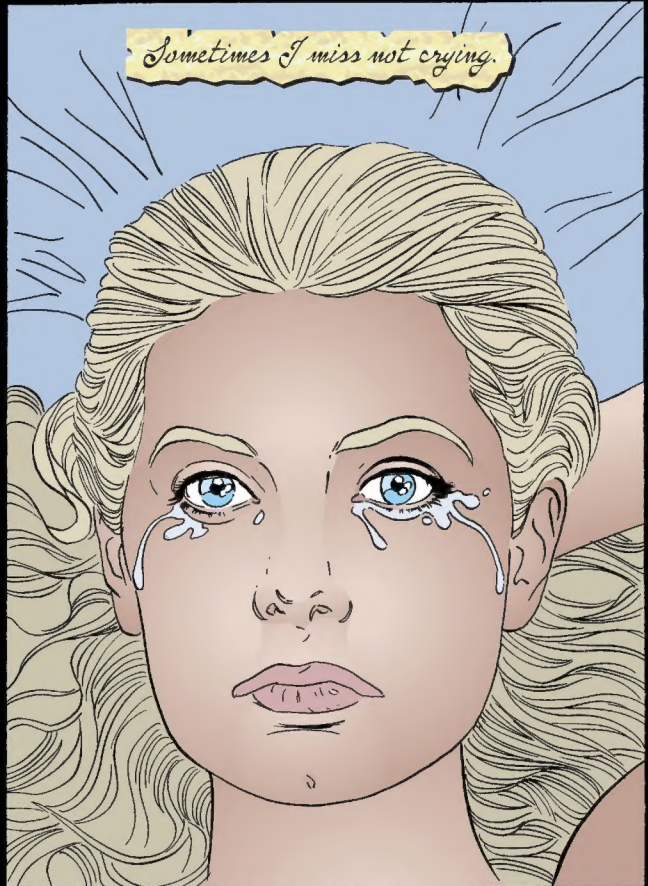
...ignorant of all the true ills of the world?



Sometimes I do so wonder in the night.



I never cried when we were wood. I couldn't.



Sometimes I miss not crying.

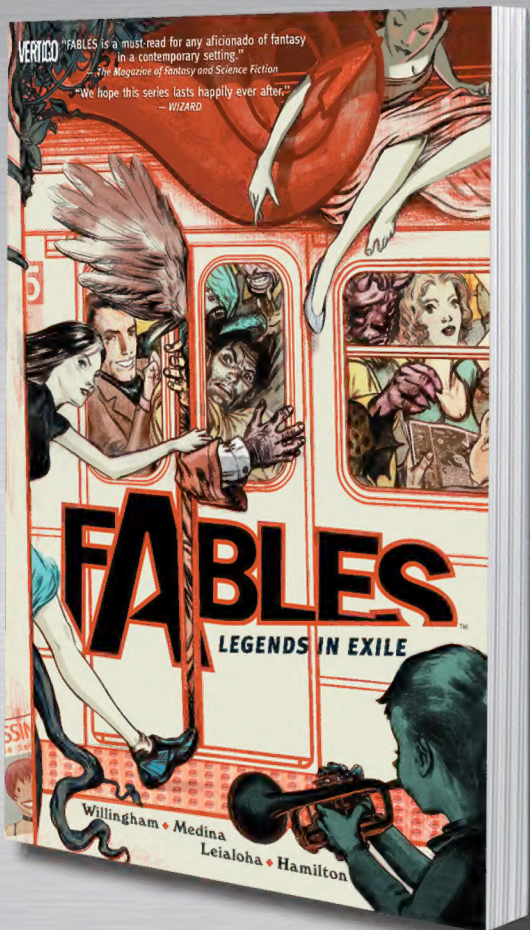
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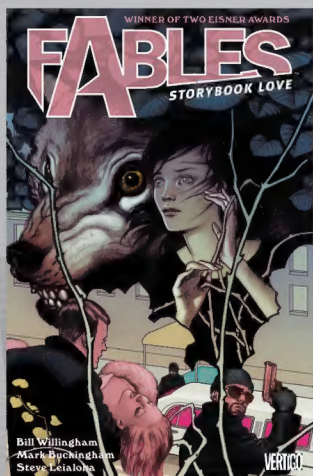
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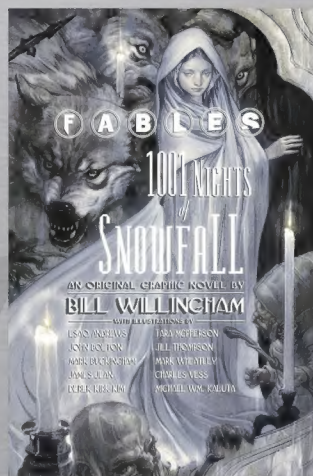
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